Ready-to-use software often best choice

The success of small computers in business environments boils down to one word: software. If you can beg, borrow, buy or build good programs, a computer is an invaluable tool. If you can't, it's a useless hunk of metal.

A basic, but often ignored rule, is to always shop for software (or programs), before shopping for hardware (the machine and the devices that hook up to it). Decide what jobs need to be done, find the software to do them, then shop for a machine to run the software. The programs you need may only be available on certain computers, which narrows hardware choices considerably.

In selecting software — specifically programs that perform such tasks as accounts receivable, job costing or word processing — there are three choices: canned, custom or combination.

Three choices

Canned, or packaged programs are pre-written and ready to use. The idea behind them is to spread the cost of development by designing for a broad range of users with similar needs. Because of the wide market, the price is low.

Also, such software sometimes comes as part of a turnkey system — a complete hardware/software combination developed for a specific market, such as doctors, contractors, etc.·

Custom software, on the other hand, is tailor-made by a software house or contract programmer for an individual client. This results in — or at least is supposed to result in — software that is exactly what the customer wants and needs.

Finally, you can use a combination; in other words, start with a package and have it modified. When this method works — and it sometimes doesn't — the buyer gets the best of both

worlds: lower cost, like a package, and a better fit, like a custom job.

Which method is best? All have proved satisfactory for thousands of small computer users, and all have fostered their share of horror stories. Over the life of your computer system, you may well use all three methods. But if you are new to computers, the rule is: always start with canned software.

Why canned is best

Canned programs offer many advantages. They often cost less than 10 percent of comparable custom programs, are usually bug-free and typically run faster than custom software. Also, they are usually ready to run, and can be seen in action before purchase. And, you can get opinions on the program from other users.

An often-overlooked advantage is that canned programs usually come with good documentation and learning materials. Some also have audio or video instructional tapes, and others are supported by local computer stores and training centers.

On the negative side, some specialized businesses may have difficulty finding canned software to suit their needs. Also, the software may not be a very good fit. For example, "job costing" may not mean the same thing to the user and the person who wrote the program.

Canned software probably also means discarding special practices, revising forms, doing without certain reports, or otherwise changing the way you do business.

Custom software, on the other hand, is expensive. Also, it's not easy finding someone to do custom programming. For this reason, I rarely recommend it to companies automating for the first time.

The lure of combination software

What about starting out with canned software, and then having it modified? Presumably, that would save money and result in a program that is tailored closely to your preferences.

The idea sounds good but is hard to implement. It is hard for the programmers, mainly because many mass market programs use machine language that's tough to alter. Also, to avoid piracy, some software publishers take "security measures" that make it virtually impossible to change programs.

Maybe the only way out of this bind is to have the software house that wrote the package make the modifications. This can work well if the seller is willing, and the buyer gets a firm price in advance and specifies a definite completion date.

The bottom line

The bottom line is to start with a package, even if you're convinced that you will want custom software later. You can throw the package away after you've tried it out and still get your money's worth, because you will have learned what you want in a custom program. Since most businesses don't know which features they want, they can thus avoid spending thousands of dollars to get a program that isn't right.

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